

Ambulance fees: An idea whose time hasn't come

by Philip M. Andrews

Not long ago, a neighbor of mine had a fire in his kitchen. Soon after he called 911, there was a knock on the door. He opened it to find two fire trucks and a dozen firefighters ready to douse the spreading fire. He told me his first reaction was "Oh my God, I can't afford all this much attention." Then he remembered — no fee, it was already included in his county taxes.

My neighbor had already paid for fire protection, just as we already pay for ambulance service. That's why it struck lots of folks as strange when Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan asked the County Council for permission to charge up to \$650 per ambulance ride as part of his effort to close the budget gap.

As local jurisdictions encounter money woes, some are turning to this stratagem. The notion is to charge for ambulance service, bill the health insurance companies and pocket the

money. Keep in mind that some insurance plans don't cover ambulance transport or may require a significant co-payment. If you have no insurance, you'll still be billed but won't, it is said, have to pay.

Leaving aside the problem of whether health insurance companies will swallow this "wink and nod," there are several other good reasons why ambulance fees are an idea whose time hasn't come:

- As stated, we already pay for ambulance service as part of our taxes. It is an essential public safety service.

- What's next? Charging extra when police catch the guy who burgled your house? Or charging extra when the road in front of your house is resurfaced or your county trees pruned?

- The deterrent effect the substantial fees could have on the willingness of some in need to call for an ambulance.

- It's hard to measure the likelihood of something not happening (that is, people who need an ambulance not call-

ing one). However, a phone survey done by the county's volunteer fire/rescue personnel found that nearly a quarter of those surveyed would be less likely to call an ambulance given the \$650 price tag.

- The composition of our county's fire/rescue service. Unlike many other jurisdictions, ours is staffed by career fire/rescue and volunteers. There's something wrong with charging for ambulance services that are to a significant extent being donated by volunteers. Various volunteers have said that charging for ambulance services will undermine their efforts to supplement fire/rescue services and apparatus through community fund-raising.

- The plan for a third party to bill ambulance users for the fee and keep 10 percent of funds "captured." Bill

- collectors may have an incentive to be heavy-handed in collecting fees if they are paid a percentage of the funds captured. Let's think twice before we subject thousands of people

who use ambulance service to aggressive bill collectors.

For these reasons and more, the council's Public Safety Committee, which I chair, has unanimously recommended to the full council against implementing the county executive's ambulance fees this year. I expect the council to follow the committee's lead.

Instead, let's take a good, long look before we rush forward with a scheme to fill county coffers that might well have unintended — and deadly — consequences for vulnerable people in our community. We should at least exhaust other revenue-raising measures — and take a hard look at cost-saving measures — before we resort to charging people for an emergency ride to the hospital.

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